

# From Cocoa Farms to Candy Chutes

THE WONKA-FICATION OF CHOCOLATE IN AMERICAN SOCIETY IS MULTIPLY DAMAGING, INCREASING COCOA PRODUCER VULNERABILITY TO COVID-19 AND FURTHER ELIDING THE INEQUALITIES THAT CHARACTERIZE THE VALUE CHAIN.

By Carla D. Martin and Kathryn Sampeck

“**W**here is fancy bred? In the heart or in the head?” asks Gene Wilder as Willy Wonka, borrowing from *The Merchant of Venice*, in the 1971 classic film. That Shakespeare reference is not so far-fetched; the late sixteenth to early seventeenth century was precisely the time the world started to fall in love with chocolate. Mesoamericans had enjoyed cocoa in various recipes for foods and drinks for thousands of years. Even though Europeans were relative latecomers to the chocolate world, they enthusiastically adopted it into daily life, if a little guiltily, debating whether chocolate was a sinful indulgence or panacea for all sorts of ills. Cocoa and chocolate assumed a special place in cuisine that amused the palate in ways different from staples such as grains or meat. Wonka, then, celebrated what many consumers had long felt: an allure of chocolate that soothed and pleased, nourishing a forgetting of the cares of life. We see the latest incarnation for the carnal enjoyment of chocolate in the wide array of holiday-themed treats in bright packaging designed to banish worry and fear. This “recession-proof” treat, “instant indulgence,” and “mood booster” is a fanciful escape from the harsh realities of today’s world.

In the United States, Americans consume approximately 5.3 kg of chocolate per capita each year (Prinz 2020 offers 2018 rates for many countries, including the United States), with ever more complexity in their choices around sustainability, flavor, and brand loyalty. Americans have an ongoing

love affair with chocolate, treating it as a fanciful, fantasy-laden, fiction—the food of the gods. Shrewd marketing and product placement contribute to chocolate’s Wonka-fication: we crave chocolate in a wide variety of social and emotional contexts, eagerly succumb to impulse purchases or



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consumption at the checkout counter or meeting table. We are easily seduced by chocolate's presence and promise. The chocolate available in the marketplace also reflects our stratified patterns of consumption, focused on the end product rather than the process. Pick your chocolate to reflect your tastes and your values: mass-produced confections, hand-crafted bonbons, Fair Trade, fine, craft, specialty, industrial, white, milk, dark milk, dark, sugar-free, origin, microbatch, flavored, spread, drinking, ganache, truffle, praline, dragée... The promise is that we can consume our way not just to happiness, but also to celebratory pleasure in life.

The chocolate industry has tried hard to strengthen the American fixation on the colorful and soothing end product during the COVID-19 pandemic. A glance at dueling headlines on *Confectionery News*—"Chocolate and Candy Soothe COVID-19 Trauma, National Confectioners Association Reveals" and "Cocoa and the Coronavirus: Can It Boost the

Immune System?"—offer claims disconnected from the pandemic's extraordinary disruption for global food systems. As far as consumers should know, chocolate is doing fine. Socially distanced consumers of 2020 fashion their identities around what they consume, prodded by marketing campaigns to build candy chutes or buy no-touch candy grabbers for low-contact trick-or-treating.

These delicious, chocolatey comforts in moments of crisis come at a high human cost. The next question in *The Merchant of Venice* points us to problems that fancy, whether from the heart or head, candy coats: "How begot, how nourished?" The production of cocoa and chocolate is predicated on a lopsided value chain that has gotten worse with the COVID-19 pandemic. It is precisely the harsh realities of working life for producers in countries such as Cote d'Ivoire and the Dominican Republic that provide relief to US consumers. A few examples from our recent research highlight particularly

fragile points in a commodity system that depends on the labor of people in the so-called Global South, especially women.

Evidence that pandemic conditions are deepening social inequality in the cocoa-chocolate value chain is already apparent and indicates that conditions are likely to worsen as infections spread in cocoa growing regions. Fine Cacao and Chocolate Institute (FCCI) research activities include anthropological evaluations on three fronts, with updated data forthcoming: (1) small chocolate businesses (March 15–22, 2020, published March 23); (2) cocoa production and trade (April 2–19, 2020, published April 20); and (3) pastry and chocolatier markets (April 13–May 13, 2020, published May 14). Before the pandemic, chocolate love was big: cocoa and chocolate are a substantial part of the global food economy; the global chocolate industry is valued at over US\$100 billion and 40–50 million people worldwide depend on cocoa for their livelihood (see the World Cocoa Foundation 2012 report).



Rather than being a sweet retreat to bank on, hope for current and future cocoa sales is dim: 87 percent of respondents reported at least a 20 percent sales decrease, and over 50 percent reported a 50 percent sales decrease, at the same time that over 70 percent reported an increase in expenses to address the impact of COVID-19. The price of cocoa has been depressed globally since 2016, so producers are now facing a double burden of low price and market interruption, with prices having dropped approximately 20 percent since a 2015 peak. In our survey, 73 percent of respondents are either unconfident or very unconfident that sales are on track for the 2020 season (FCCI April 20, 2020). This anxiety is well-founded: representatives from large cocoa buyers and traders are on the record as having reduced or paused their cocoa purchasing for up to two years.

This pause for Big Chocolate has the potential to intensify sharp contrasts between producers and consumers. Cocoa cultivation, chocolate making, and chocolate consumption is starkly unequal by race and ethnicity: 75 percent of chocolate consumption takes place in Europe, the United States, and Canada, and is processed in companies that are largely composed of white people. At the same time, 100 percent of the world's cocoa is produced by Black, Indigenous, Latin American, and Asian people (Africa, 75 percent; Latin America, 13 percent; South and South-east Asia, 12 percent), yet people in these areas consume only 25 percent of the world's finished chocolate, with Africans consuming the least at 4 percent. The two FCCI surveys of upstream value chain actors—small chocolate businesses (n=125) and pastry and chocolatier professionals (n=210)—in Europe, Asia, Latin America, the United States, and Canada reveal that 80 percent of respondent businesses have experienced significant to existentially negative impact from COVID-19 (FCCI March 23, 2020; May 14, 2020). Data from the United States and Europe demonstrate that small businesses and their workers are the hardest hit. So far, the chocolate industry is not proactively trying to investigate,



TEDDY M. RUIZ, CACAO VERAPAZ

**Brothers Victor, Juan Carlos, and Marvin Chen (left to right) of Cacao Verapaz rest after manually loading a shipping container with sacks of specialty cacao for export from Guatemala.**

much less mitigate, these circumstances. It is common in the industry during these moments for consultants to sell expensive forecasting reports, or for private companies to conduct their own internal proprietary research, which heightens inequality in ability to respond by limiting access to knowledge.

These disparities have deep historical roots. In fact, the closest parallel to the current crisis occurred during the dawn of global chocolate consumption in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Diseases endemic in Europe, Asia, and Africa, such as measles, smallpox, typhus, influenza, and pneumonic plague were novel in the Americas. Devastating waves of infections hit colonial Guatemala (today's Guatemala, El Salvador, and southern Mexico) in 1532, 1545, 1558–1562, and 1576–1581. Mortality rates of Indigenous cocoa farmers in this premier growing region were as high as 90 percent. The chronic, severe labor shortage had a momentous result: Spaniards

satisfied workforce shortfalls with coerced, captive Africans, and cocoa became largely a product of enslaved labor (dynamics discussed in greater detail in Martin and Sampeck 2015). This crucial turn in chocolate history was precipitated by epidemic and pandemic disease and fundamentally reoriented the nature of cocoa agriculture. The takeaway for stakeholders in this space today, and acutely felt, is that every possible level—governmental, industrial, community—needs to be investing in access to care for cocoa producing communities. The cocoa forest is not a factory with easily interchanged parts, but instead a community that scrambles to reorganize in the wake of devastating loss.

Our initial lightning poll on cocoa production and trade surveyed cocoa producers, traders, technical service providers, and NGOs (n=159) (FCCI April 20, 2020). Their responses show how COVID-19 worsens farming conditions: 87 percent of respondents face significant

restrictions to movement that impact their ability to harvest, manage quality, or otherwise engage in their cocoa businesses. The chocolate industry-funded nonprofit the International Cocoa Initiative warns that the worst forms of child labor in cocoa farming, long a persistent, wicked problem, are now increasing (Ravetti 2020). CGIAR, a consortium of international agricultural research centers, reports that reduction in movement and limitations on gathering size in producing communities disproportionately impact women, as they cannot work on staple crop farming, continue informal economy work (often food related), or represent their needs in group meetings to advocate for material support (CGIAR 2020). Finally, 77 percent in the FCCI survey report that the cocoa sector is currently unrepresented or underrepresented in local and national governmental responses to COVID-19.

Over two-thirds of respondents report that their workforce has preexisting conditions that make them high risk if infected by COVID-19 at the same time as the vast majority report that COVID-19 testing remains difficult to impossible to access in their rural areas. People also face significant limitations in access to care, paid sick leave, and safe, affordable quarantine facilities. Current statistics show that the number of COVID-19 cases in Latin America and Africa is growing rapidly and the virus has alarming differential health impacts by race and ethnicity. Most corporate donations have been made in three directions: (1) individual donations of soap and personal protective equipment; (2) World Economic Forum donations (mostly untraceable); and (3) nongovernmental organizations such as the Red Cross (mostly untraceable and not necessarily directed explicitly to the rural communities of cocoa producers). This is in the context of many cocoa producing countries having stated publicly and through legislation that they aim for universal health coverage. Coverage might exist in theory, but in practice is not comprehensive due to lack of access and overall lack of vigorous health care provision in rural communities.

Long-standing pressures from the International Monetary Fund and World Bank to industrialize also perpetuate underinvestment in these agricultural communities.

Our ongoing research not only reveals stark inequalities, but also can encourage collective action and effective planning in response to the pandemic's impact. For example, our data offer support for industry watchdog VOICE Network (2020), which pushes for Big Chocolate COVID-19 responses to prioritize living income action and investment in health care. Our findings also point to solutions that so far are the least prioritized by the chocolate industry for cocoa producers. Policies of food sovereignty and peasant agriculture, summarized by Douwe van der Ploeg (2020), counteract the untenable situation acutely felt by cocoa farmers of being simultaneously dependent on food imports (because they do not grow a subsistence crop) and exports of cocoa to consumers largely located far from growing grounds. Other important solutions to ameliorate the worst of pandemic consequences also include territorial markets and agroecology. Recent research by Clapp and Moseley (2020) discusses how selling food that is produced, processed, distributed, and consumed within a specific territory and encouraging practices of intercropping to improve efficiency (in an ecological sense) maximizes resilience, mitigates disruptions in specialized global supply chains, and reduces food import dependence by encouraging shorter, more nimble supply chains to meet local food needs. Emerging research by Martin and McDonald-Baertl (2020) points to the need for more effective farmer training, especially in times of interruption and crisis. COVID-19 caused a global shutdown for much of agricultural extension training when it could instead have utilized culturally and technologically appropriate means to improve and even accelerate peer-to-peer training and communication support for farmers. These solutions are among those most likely to address the political economic crisis that COVID-19 has heightened in this value chain.

US consumer desires to feed tastes and values are whetted by heartwarming images and sweet childhood memories that seem ever-present in home quarantine; chocolate could be just the medicine to cure ills of loneliness. It is not happenstance, but rather a direct consequence of the precarious conditions in which cocoa producers operate that consumers benefit so much from the enjoyment and Wonka-fiction of chocolate in their daily lives. Data show that chocolate's siren's song is not, however, as strong as one might think and that Big Chocolate companies have access to deep enough reserves to coast through the collective fixation with securing a constant supply of cocoa for our soothing chocolate fancies. The softer market is a hard reality for cocoa producers facing multiple vulnerabilities due to COVID-19. While inequalities might appear to be baked into the value chain, research for and with cocoa producers reveals that strategies involving both the heart and the head are those that will ultimately succeed. Holistic, governmental, industrial, and community employment of these strategies will allow us to reimagine and reshape cocoa and chocolate with compelling, practical alternatives to the failed status quo. 🌀

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